early digital:

AN INTERVIEW WITH PEER BODE

Cheryl Jackson

C.J.> In thinking about the future and new technologies, about how they're affecting art making and all, it made me start thinking about the past. I wanted to talk to you about older electronic technologies, and their relationship to video art and your work in particular. When and how did you first start producing video?

P.B.> Somewhere around 1971, with the early black and white portapak. I was in school at SUNY Binghamton and I borrowed one from the TV Center, which was in Binghamton at that time. I was an undergraduate studying filmmaking, and I was making films, working with Larry Gotheim and Ken Jacobs. That was when the cinema department was just starting out. It was also a time where a lot of visiting artist were coming in—Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits came by a number of times, Hollis Frampton, Tony came, some of the Warhol group . . .

C.J.> Do you remember any of the discussions that went on—about the differing aesthetic between film and video, and why people were excited about video versus film, for example?

P.B.> Actually, not so much, except the filmmakers biases,which were clearly ones I was aware of. It had to do with the fact that filmmaking was a serious medium and had this history and significant work made within it. Video was something that hadn't proven itself and was also this ugly low-res image. I remember this being said, but actually I never took a course in video when I was at the school. I probably had some of those biases myself. I also remember Stan Brakhage being a very clear spokesperson for that position, that video was this evil blue light and it was this hideous medium that no one should ever work in. He had these theories that he referred to that had to do with the flicker rates of video versus film and how it drove you insane, and that there was even scientific proof of what was wrong with it. I don't know exactly why it happened, but I graduated and never made any film after that. I made video. That also had to do with the Experimental TV Center being in Binghamton, being aware of the place, doing a little bit of work with Nicholas Ray, a Hollywood film director who taught at Binghamton for two years. We would go down to the TV Center to work on projects. Nick had an understanding of the TV Center and its potentials that I didn't quite understand or appreciate until years later. This had to do with electronic cinema potential and being able to make films with multi-screens, multi-image, and designing something based on painterly notions of how one would fill a frame and be able to play several narratives at the same time. And what that might mean—the different registers where a narrative might play out, what it is people are saying, what is it people are thinking, and other issues playing themselves out all at the same time. We were thinking about these kinds of ideas and at the same time—at the Center—trying to figure out how to work the keyer. So when I graduated, that was a media center, a community media center, and very importantly, was low-cost access. It was a way to continue to make work and that's how I started doing video.

C.J.> So you decided to stay in Binghamton after college . . .

P.B.> Yes. In 1974 I was still living in Binghamton and was involved with the American Dance Asylum. Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Louis Welk were a part of that . . .Bill and Louis had gone through the Brockport Dance program, Arnie had been in San Francisco . . . They decided they wanted to be three hours from NYC and so they drew a circle on a map to see where they should live. In Binghamton they were able to rent a three-story space for $100 per month and they produced work there for several years. Every single month there was a new concert; people were coming from NYC to choreograph and dance. I worked together with them on some of those projects with some video–concerts with a number of monitors and such. That was kind of a way into the TV center, working with them and using the video equipment and, again, really getting support in terms of equipment access from the Center.

C.J.> Describe some of those early times at the Center, which was 20 years ago now.

P.B.> Ralph Hocking, one of the founders of the Center, came from a sculpture and visual arts background, and one of his interests was wanting to extend what video might be, in terms of a set of tools. He had some contact with Nam June Paik and was interested in some his ideas . . . like the Paik-Abe Colorizer and the notion of artists' tools. Ralph helped support some of the development of the Paik-Abe Synthesizers. Abe came in and soldered and worked on those devices and Nam June would vacuum. Abe was a designer who worked at SONY and he was the one with the technical know-how. They pulled together something that had to do with kludging old equipment together, like a mixer put together with a color encoder from a camera. Just like what you'd now call a computer hacker, they were the analog electronic hackers. They didn't invent anything from scratch, but took these chunks from what already existed and ended up with the colorizer—the Paik-Abe Synthesizer—this thing that was multiple channel with switches, etc., and was about live performance kind of things.

So Ralph was involved with that, and he was interested in modifying and adding things to the camera, adding external contro

to the camera, adding other controls to other boxes like SEGs and other stuff like that. Then David Jones arrived and he got involved designing keyers and various other equipment and this body of tools began to get developed. Walter Wright was there in 1974 and he was someone who had a degree in architecture. He'd been working at Dolphin Studios in NYC, which was a special effects house of its time, doing computer graphics special effects with a system called the "Scan-A-Mate," which was a fancy raster scan system with extra coils added to the tube and extra finely tuned oscillators. It was the machine that was used to do all the CBS logos and stuff like that in the 60s. Walter knew programming and had very much an architect's sensibility about building structures and language, basic language issues that had to do with what digital was. He was involved in a project that had to do with coming up with a programming language for hardware that didn't even exist yet. Dr. Don MacArthur, who was a professor of physics at SUC Cortland was designing some digital hardware. It was called the "Spatial and Intensity Digitizer," and it was basically an analog-to-digital converter that would digitize the video image.

Binghamton is also an industrial-electronics center—Singer-Link is there, IBM is there. There was a certain amount of surplus stuff that you could get so cheap. I remember Ralph buying 100 racks that you could slide boards—circuit boards—into. . .

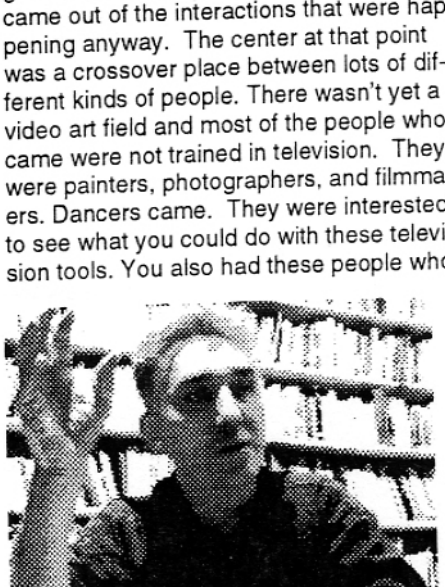
That was the environment at the Center that I walked into. Plus, artists were coming up to use the equipment—the colorizer and the keyers—and this residency structure was starting to happen. But also there would be days at a time when no one would come. A number of us sort of got interested in building things, and putting together some equipment and in a way that came out of the interactions that were happening anyway. The center at that point was a crossover place between lots of different kinds of people. There wasn't yet a video art field and most of the people who came were not trained in television. They were painters, photographers, and filmmakers. Dancers came. They were interested to see what you could do with these television tools. You also had these people who were into electronics, engineering, architecture. Science and art, which is also sometimes an oil-water situation. It's interesting to get those types of different people together, communicating, exchanging ideas. And part of what was exciting was that you were always confronting someone who had this body of knowledge that you knew nothing about. Being the early and mid-70s, there was a pluralistic attitude, there was multidisciplinary activity going on.

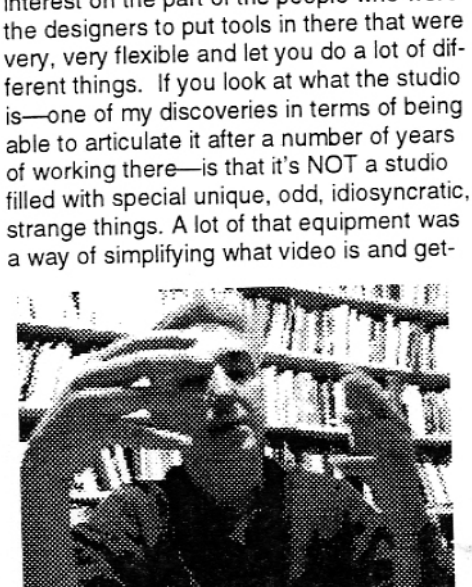
I remember one thing about that time—that aspect of structuralism that wasn't about a master narrative that you understood the whole world from. But the aspect that was really exciting was a "systems thinking," a way of looking at a lot of things that are very different and then being able to see them in relationship to each other. It lends itself very nicely to a multidisciplinary approach—what happens when you cross one set of ideas with another set of ideas. Then you add the particular historical moment and what the ideas are in the field at a certain time. There was a lot of talk about crossover and what can come out of them. That was definitely playing itself out at the Center.

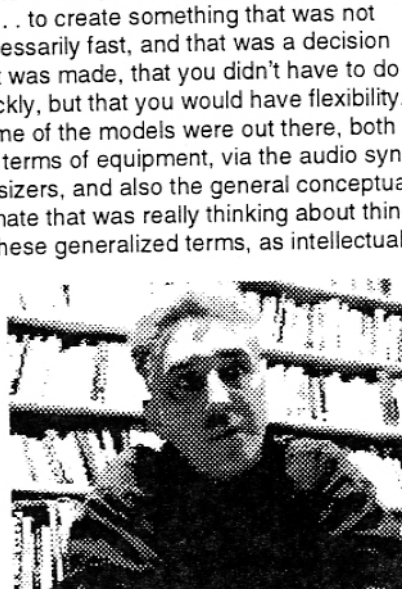
C.J.> Programmers, architects, designers, artists all working together—that seems really unusual, even unique, by today's measure. Were the artists treated as equals?

P.B.> The artists were privileged, they were the reason, they were the ones coming up to use the facility. It was made available to the community and the community was becoming more and more artists who were coming from other places to come work there in residencies. Absolutely equals. What ended up happening were lots and lots of discussions and conversations between the artists and designer-engineers. The artists would say "can it do this or I saw that, how about . . . ?" There was a genuine interest on the part of the people who were the designers to put tools in there that were very, very flexible and let you do a lot of different things. If you look at what the studio is—one of my discoveries in terms of being able to articulate it after a number of years of working there—is that it's NOT a studio filled with special unique, odd, idiosyncratic, strange things. A lot of that equipment was a way of simplifying what video is and getting at it at some basic level. In a lot of cases it was starting with a given, like an SEG. The SEG is a specialized tool that exists for particular reasons . . . There are all sorts of ideas, assumptions, conceptual ideas about what video is that are built into that machine, and part of what David did, and Ralph did, and Walter, Nam June, and Shu Abe did was ask the question "How do you generalize this thing further? This is already a specific patch, how do you generalize this so we can do more things?" Again, this was in the time frame of structuralist generalized thinking, that set sort of conceptual background of the time.

There were also other models of their machines that pushed that notion, like audio synthesizers. Those guys were all aware that audio synthesizers had already done all of this stuff . . . The Moog Synth was out there and it was a totally modular system . . . And so rather than something being for a particular purpose, all the pieces and parts were laid out very generally and you would patch or reconfigure to get many different machines. It was a way to simplify the system, generalizing it so that you got to some basic aspect of what it could do. Which was not about some Modernist essentialism or anything like that, I don't think It was really about what video is. I still wor at the Center and I'm always amazed at what level I begin to understand what vide is again. Even the new camcorders and the new decks , they do amazing things, and they're important tools. But in another sense they're about a set of marketing issues that aren't really about the materials. And from an electronic design point of vie they could be really generalized out more. Professional machines have always been little simpler. For example, they're just ma ual controls rather than just automatic, which keep everybody in some sort of idio mode. That was part of the design conce at the Center, of what was being put toge er . . . to create something that was not necessarily fast, and that was a decision that was made, that you didn't have to do quickly, but that you would have flexibility Some of the models were out there, both the terms of equipment, via the audio syn thesizers, and also the general conceptua climate that was really thinking about thin in these generalized terms, as intellectual







systems, and how you would interface systems, and the language was already there. It was interesting how we sort of pulled all the pieces apart.

C.J.> Isn't that very much like what is happening now with computers? Languages and systems? How does what you're describing correlate to today's environment?

P.B.> Lyotard said that the structure of the computer needed to be made visible, in work. A concern about so much work made now is that it has no reference to its process, it's in the simulation mode, the sign mode of what the image means. These notions of simulation, what its material base is is not important. I would agree. It becomes part of a philosophy, and aesthetic, within some work. It'll be interesting to see what work breaks out of the basic structure of the computer.

C.J.> Can you talk about how your own work has evolved over the years? Has the rural environment, or your physical environment, affected your work in some ways?

P.B.> I remember it being said at the Center that a number of people who were into image processing—that's what it was called then—had been in NYC at one point and they couldn't support what they were doing there because you needed all sorts. It had something to do with environment. You needed more than just a camera and monitor—you needed the keyer, mixer, colorizer, or maybe audio synthesizer. You needed this gear which was also expensive. In terms of environment and communities, it has to do with economics. For me, not living in NYC, even though it has always been an important place for me, it wasn't a useful place to produce, so I consciously decided to live where I had access to tools so that I could continue to be involved in making. This had continued to be one of the most fundamental things about being a practitioner, having access to tools. And I could also work at a number of different levels—the given would be that I want to continue being a practitioner with them.

I was really influenced by my interest and involvement in New American cinema, making work that was temporal, that pushed the potential, both as a visual medium and a physical and conceptual medium. I've never been a purist, choosing one to the exclusion of another. If anything, what is interesting—be it film or video—is what one could make that had something to do with a personal, human scale, that one or two people could make, rather than an industrial model or process. In terms of resources and ideas and what influences you, what can you literally work with? Just as I'd worked with portapaks, as the newer tools became available I incorporated them. I bought in the late 70s an Elf computer, an ElfII, with 16K expanded memory, which is really a joke to imagine at this point—and that connected with some equipment I built with David Jones. That was an analog-to-digital converter that allowed you to flip gray levels, and there were some tricks about how to mix color in from the subcarrier of the sync generator, and then when you flipped the gray levels you got these spills of color, and you couldn't always predict what they would be. There was something really exciting about getting to the coding of the image, the structures of the machines.

C.J.> Does processing have to do with experimentation and discovery or does it have to do more with aesthetic intent, how it has to look for you?

P.B.> If you're interested in process, yes. That's a key for me. I didn't have a set idea of what I wanted to get across and what I wanted to show, what I wanted it to be. It was something that I discovered as I went along. I never liked the idea of being a writer/director and then just going in and carrying out this thing that you had thought of. I was interested in process, and the body of the machine and what that was about, how that could inform me and what kind of possibilities it might give me. Experimentation was and is something that's an important part of it—discovering things you didn't know about and couldn't anticipate. In a sense it was just as much about discovering something about yourself—what you now know that you didn't know before—as it was about something new happening with the making or something about the material. It's sort of like accepting the richness of everyday life and not taking a predetermined position about why you would do something and what it is.

I think there's something unique about the medium which has to do with the fact that it didn't start with an artisan process and then get industrial. It started out industrial and never had an artisan tradition. There was a kind of working backwards that some of us were doing because here these things were, already configured for the industry to do various things. That was part of the impetus—to simplify the tools, to get to the more basic place, to get hands on, to get at the signal, and then also to make work that connected with ideas you were thinking about and concerns that you had. That's the interesting thing about discovering what might be called formal devices or formal issues, and connecting them with the kind of content that you want to deal with.

How does one bring together certain experiences and certain relationships and create images that have a kind of energy? It really is about formal devices at that point, in terms of how one constructs an image. Then what happens when you make that image do some kind of work? When I look at my own work, there's a period of it that really was about trying to understand and create some visual vocabulary, that had to do with these tools, that had to do with a real learning process. And then there comes a point where the images are put to work in a context, narrative situations and structures, and then become part of a multi-level narrative that's happening, part of it visual-based. Part is about these formal concerns and another part is dealing with issues that have to do with language, how narrative-making then creates identity processes and how an audience is asked or forced to respond, is put in a certain position. All of these dynamics are going on. I've been interested in those kind of issues all along. The business model for how to make video has never made sense to me. For the kinds of work that many of us do, it really takes longer to make. Part of it has to do with how one supports it. With simple tools and inexpensive types of tools, one can get at some of this stuff.